

Epiphany 3(A). January 22, 2017. Matthew 4: 12-23.

Folks, I feel like I have to talk about this weekend, but I insist that it is my intention to talk about it with love and compassion for all of you, and in my native tongue. I mean, I think that on a weekend like this the church has to talk about politics, but it should do so in its own language, and not just drape a fair linen over the platform of a specific candidate or contemporary political party. To me, the church's language means the Bible, the sacraments, and the prayers. So this sermon will start with the Bible, move to the sacraments, and end with the Baptismal Covenant. We'll move quickly, and I'd appreciate your prayers.

When the government of Herod arrests Jesus' friend, cousin, and colleague John the Baptist, Jesus does a number of things. I think these things can give us guidance in the current political climate. First, he withdraws to Galilee, where he was from. He goes quickly back to his roots. In a time of political unrest, of fear and resentment and anger, we should dig deeply into what makes us who we are. For us here, at least while we're in this room, this means the Bible, the sacraments, the prayers that give the warp and woof to our lives together. It means certain practices such as hospitality, forgiveness, and giving our gifts for the benefit of others that are the beating heart of the Christian life.

Second, Jesus gets crystal clear about his message: "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." We can say quite a few things about this message itself. It is obviously politically relevant, coming as it does in response to a political act of injustice and centering on the political unit of a kingdom. But it isn't a direct endorsement of an alternative candidate or political party. It is something bigger, that impacts on current political arrangements and alliances, but cannot be reduced to them. The kingdom of heaven isn't realized by getting rid of Herod and installing Claudius. That's not to say that Christians shouldn't make temporary, conditional alliances with a political party, but it seems to me that we can never be content with something so banal as achieving power. We have to be dreaming bigger, of a different kind of world.

Another thing to say about this message is that the nearness of the kingdom of heaven calls us to action: specifically to repentance, a change of life. Again, in the political context of this passage, what is being called for here is not a discrete action in response to John's arrest, but a new way of living that is pointed in a different direction—towards the reign of God that is hovering nearby but not quite here. And Matthew assures us that this message is good news. Jesus' proclamation of good news is tied to teaching and curing diseases. Both of these things are counter-cultural for us: responding to wickedness with good news and coupling proclamation with good work. If you don't believe that this is counter-cultural, I will show you my facebook newsfeed after church, where sour diagnoses with little hope and few works of mercy are very much the order of the day.

Third, Jesus starts going around and building a community. He gathers up these followers who will both be an alternative community to the way of the world and the people who will carry out a mission to change the world. And about that community: I think many of us can learn something from these new disciples. You see, Jesus doesn't really give them much in the way of recruitment materials. All they get is the odd invitation to come fish for people. The rest of the gospel shows us clearly that as they start out, they don't really know what they're getting into. They'll make mistakes frequently, clearly misunderstanding the implications and requirements of the life they've committed

themselves to. But today we have to admire them and learn from them—while we should strive for the kind of clarity that Jesus achieves in his retreat to Galilee, if we wait until we're sure of everything, we'll never get out of the boat. Lacking Jesus' divinity, we are only going to get access to the right answers while on the move, which means that we're going to stumble through some wrong answers on the way. This is part of the reason why I am grateful that forgiveness is a non-negotiable part of Christian community. As we try to figure out how to live out the commitments of our faith and baptismal covenant in concrete ways in our communities, we are going to make mistakes. I'd like to tell you a story that I think illustrates one mistake we might be prone to.

Two weeks ago, we baptized a baby at the 10:30 service. Well, a toddler. Since we combined the baptismal liturgy with the annual Epiphany Pageant, we successfully crafted what is easily the wildest liturgy I have ever been a part of. But that's not the part I want to talk about. I want to talk about a plan that Deacon Sue and I came up with for this baptism. You see, we had noticed that over time, a kind of grime can build up inside the baptismal font and it's a real pain to scrub it off. But no one wants grimey holy water, especially if you're going to be dumping it over a baby's head and then sprinkling the whole congregation with it.

So yes, we did scrub out the font. But then we found this elegant glass bowl that was a little bit smaller than the font and decided to place it inside the stone bowl. So, we'd fill up the glass bowl and then if some grime or sludge or lichen or algae began a holy but gross growth on the bowl, we could just run it through the dishwasher. Piece of cake. But we also have a tradition—usually followed—here of the chalice bearers for the day pouring the soon-to-be-holy water from jars into the baptismal font before the baptism. And two weeks ago, we didn't tell them about this smaller bowl sitting inside the larger stone font.

So we all processed back there to do the baptism. Holy chaos. Wonderful. And I started saying the prayers and the chalice bearers took their jars of water and began to pour. And kept pouring. And kept pouring. Suddenly there was an absolute deluge of water pouring beautifully into this font and our little glass bowl was completely surrounded and submerged in this symbol of God's saving presence in our lives. Sue and I had had a good idea. No one likes sludge. But in our efforts to sanitize the symbols we use for God's work, we chose a container that was far too small. It turned out, thanks to the cooperation of the chalice bearers with the promptings of the Holy Spirit, that there was much more running grace and uncontainable liberating love and flowing passion than we had planned for. Even just the *symbols* of grace overpowered our containers for them and left our elegant bowl looking rather silly about three inches under the surface of the waters.

This is part of the good news that we proclaim in response to all the bad news. The good news that God is saving the world with a love that, like the baptismal waters, cannot be contained in our small bowls but will flame out, like shining from shook foil. The good news that in the darkest hour, the kingdom of heaven in divine judgment and compassion draws near. And also the good news that we are called by our very salvation to resist evil, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. The waters of baptism and the promises we make in baptism are only doing their job if they are always splashing out beyond our expectations, drawing us into hopes and communities that are broader and deeper than we can imagine on our own.